

A MarshMedia White Paper



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The Case for Character Education

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"It is our character that supports the promise of our future - far more than particular government programs or policies."

William J. Bennett-- writer and former secretary of education

An Introduction

Character is destiny.

~ *Heraclitus*

Honesty, fairness, responsibility, caring, respect, citizenship. In a pluralistic society, few people would question the merits of a populace imbued with good character. Ethical commitment, competence and practice in all segments of a community can be considered foundations of a functional society, and perhaps most importantly, essential to basic humanity.

Even from an individualistic perspective, the intrinsic value of our lives reflects the strength of our personal character. To our detriment, predominant western cultural mores often suggest that the quality of our lives is measured in material possessions, appearance, and social recognition, but as newspaper editor Horace Greeley once said, "Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing, and only character endures."¹

Social scientists have actually seen levels of life satisfaction decline over the last quarter of a century, despite the dramatic increase in standard of living.² In general, more wealth has not brought additional feelings of wellbeing. This trend has led one politician to conclude, "We should be thinking not just what is good for putting money in people's pockets but what is good for putting joy in people's hearts. When politicians are looking at issues they should be saying to themselves, 'How are we going to try and make sure that we don't just make people better off but we make people happier, we make communities more stable, we make society more cohesive.'"³

Centuries ago, Greek philosopher Heraclitus coined the timeless aphorism: "Character is destiny." But if character determines destiny, what determines character? How can we, as parents and educators, harness our children's desires to form their own identities, and help them choose worthy ideals upon which to build their lives?

By cultivating good character in our children and ourselves, we strengthen our families, our communities, and our world.

A Need

We have a crisis of character all across America.

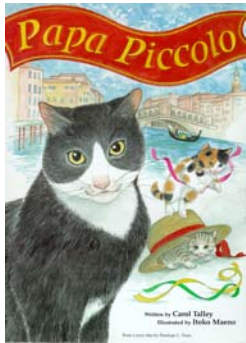
~ *Sanford McDonnell*, chair of the Character Education Partnership

School shootings, academic cheating, bullying, youth violence, gangs, vandalism, drug abuse, sexual misconduct. Well-publicized heinous and malevolent events have incited a collective hue and cry for attention to the plight of our youth and the deterioration of society.

In the wake of the increasing public clamor, the character education movement in the United States gained momentum in the early 1990s. By 1996, President Clinton, in his State of the Union address, challenged all schools to teach character education.⁴ In response, the Department of Education established the "Partnerships in Character Education" program and later, the Bush administration expanded the size of the program considerably. During a conference on Character and Community in 2002, Laura Bush announced that five states and 34 school districts had received almost \$17

million in grants to work with communities to help schools provide students with lesson plans that promote high moral character.⁵

Currently, some 31 states mandate some aspect of character education.⁶ According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP), “Character education is a national movement encouraging



schools to create environments that foster ethical, responsible, and caring young people. It is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in their students important core, ethical values that we all share such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and

respect for self and others.”⁷ The CEP was incorporated in 1993 to “encourage leaders of national education associations to give greater attention and priority to character education.”⁸ Every year, the CEP names 10 public and private schools and districts (K-12) as National Schools of Character for their outstanding work in character education.

A Will

**Good, better, best. Never let it rest.
'Til your good is better and your better is best.**

 *St. Jerome*

It doesn't require particular astuteness to recognize a correlation between individual deficits in character and deterioration of the larger society. Perhaps self-evident in its findings, one recent study showed that young people who get involved

in violence tend to have hedonistic, self-serving values, and do not care about other people's feelings.⁹

The good news is that there is some indication that the character education movement may have had some positive effect in recent years.

Contrary to public perception, serious violent crime in schools has actually trended downward since 1993.¹⁰

Between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of high school students who reported involvement in a fight (at school or elsewhere) declined from 42 percent to 33 percent.¹¹

The rate of in-school thefts and the number of students who reported skipping school decreased from 1992 to 2003.¹²

Although bullying appears to have escalated, it is not clear if the increase reflects more incidents or a greater awareness of bullying as a problem.¹³ And academic cheating and lying and are up.¹⁴ While about 20% of college students admitted to cheating in high school during the 1940s, today between 75 and 98 percent of college students report having cheated in high school.¹⁵

However, to observe a breakdown in society is facile if we don't also scrutinize possible solutions. In the age of educational accountability and research-based practices, it's important that we closely examine the successes and failures of the character education movement.

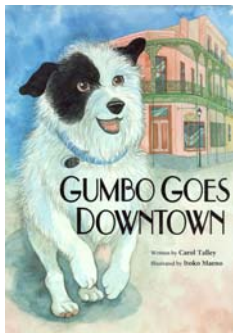
A Way

A child should be respectful, honest, diligent, kind, fair-minded, temperate in food and drink, and clean.

— William Holmes McGuffey (according to William Damon¹⁶)

Before examining the question of “What works?” in character education, it might be useful to size-up some of the criticisms of the movement.

The inclusion of character education curricula has sometimes been a dilemma for schools, often reflecting divergent philosophical points of view about ethics and morality that have been debated for centuries. Moral relativism holds that ethical standards and morality do not reflect universal truths, but instead are culturally based.¹⁷ In the school setting then, the question is sometimes raised: Whose values are to be taught? Some critics see character education indoctrinating values possibly contrary to those taught at home.¹⁸



One rebuttal to this argument is exemplified in an op-ed piece in *Education Next*, by noted scholar William Damon, who observes, “for better or worse, every school envelops its students in a moral climate.”¹⁹ As Damon points out, it is difficult to imagine

schools not actively engaged in the business of promoting such values as honesty and respectfulness. “Moral education,” he says, “comes with the territory.”²⁰

Another common criticism aimed at character education targets the assumption that education is first and foremost about academic priorities, and that teaching around character has no substantive

quality and cannot be empirically tested on standardized tests.²¹ But as we shall see, early research shows that amongst other things, effective comprehensive character education has positive effects on student achievement.²²

Respected researcher and author Karen Bohlin warns, “Whether we believe that character education is simply not our job or whether we believe it is a dangerous form of indoctrination, a “non-interference” policy leaves students without a road map.”²³

Bohlin also identifies “miss the mark” character education, in which initiatives are overly simplistic or shortsighted, often focused on stamping out problem behaviors, or “virtue of the week” programs which students are quick to size up. Bohlin asserts that effective character education is neither neat nor short-term.²⁴

So then, what *is* effective character education? What do best practices look like?

What Works

The measure of a man’s character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out.

— Thomas Babington Macaulay

Systematically evaluated studies of character education programs are scarce. A variety of methods have been found to be largely ineffective in promoting good character. Among these are lecturing and moralizing, teaching styles that are authoritative, externally derived codes of ethics, and setting an ethics agenda without involving students in the process.²⁵ Other research summarizes the limits of

character education thus: “the single use of didactic methods does not work, behavior is unrelated to one's ability to reason various questions of morality, character is developed through social interaction and environmental factors, and character development is not a simple task.”²⁶

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was established by the U.S. Department of Education in 2002 to provide scientific evidence of what works in education. Its primary purpose is to research and identify evidence-based interventions in a variety of educational topic areas. In June 2007, WWC published its first topic report on character education.

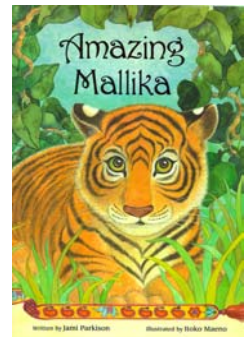
Most likely due to the small sample sizes and the scientific rigor applied, the results were somewhat slim, yet also notable. Because of the broad scope of the topic area, the WWC limited their research to programs that specifically target the teaching of core values and “prescribed activities directly related to instilling those values.”²⁷ They identified 93 studies of 41 programs that fit their criteria but only 18 studies of 13 programs met “evidence standards” established for the review of causal research.²⁸ Student outcomes were measured in three realms: behavior, academic achievement, and knowledge, attitudes and values.

The results? One program had positive effects on behavior and academic achievement. One had positive effects on knowledge, attitudes and values, and one had potentially positive effects on behavior, and knowledge, attitudes and values. Six programs had potentially positive effects in one domain but five had no discernable effects in any domain.²⁹

Author Paul Dovere, in a 2007 article in *Education Next*, explored character education programs in

six different schools. He examined each program in depth and concluded that character education programs that are “carefully designed and implemented appear to be succeeding.”³⁰ He asserts that where programs are “undeterred by philosophical disputes on the one hand and the preoccupation with academic achievement on the other, character education finds its strength at the grass roots, in those individual schools and communities where teachers, administrators, and citizens initiate programs designed to improve civility and citizenship – legitimate goals in their own right.”³¹

Another study reported in an OP-Ed piece in the *New York Times* in 2002, showed that “social and emotional learning programs significantly improve students' academic performance.”³² Compared with students outside the programs, the report noted “significantly better attendance records; their classroom behavior is more constructive and often less disruptive; they like school more; and they have better grade point averages. They are also less likely to be suspended or otherwise disciplined.”³³



Indeed, the results validate what seems intuitive to many parents and educators: children who are given clear boundaries in an environment that fosters caring and compassion exhibit better behavior and are better able to learn in school. In other words, we don't have to choose between academics and character education.

We need to do both.

The Moral of the Story

Life-transforming ideas have always come to me through books.

— Bell Hooks

As any avid reader knows, good literature explores the profound themes of humanity and gives us insight into human nature: growth and initiation, relationships and love, alienation and death. Literature is a delightful opportunity to unite academics and character education. To instill in a child a love of reading is to provide a world of meaning and a lifelong legacy. Throughout history, cultures everywhere have looked to literature for guidance and wisdom; from the Old Testament and Aesop's fables to the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *A Wrinkle in Time*, we try to fathom our purpose in life and seek to grow beyond ourselves.

Of course, reading is a critical tool in developing the skills of independent and responsible critical thinking, and students should be taught also to engage with non-fiction, but narratives provide a special place in examining issues of character. In her book, *Teaching Character Education through Literature*, Karen Bohlin offers ways in which educators can help readers examine conflicting or inconsistent moralities. "While philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists provide us with theories about the moral life, narratives provide us with concrete illustrations and vicarious experiences of moral growth and development, as well as moral decline."³⁴ Bohlin also cautions that even while narratives should be examined for accuracy and intent, the most effective books are the least didactic.

Children's book author Katherine Patterson has won numerous literary awards, but in a speech at

Ohio State University, she spoke of being frequently accused of creating unlikable characters. In her often-banned book, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, the main character has a mean and tough exterior, but as Patterson notes, "... children love Gilly. It seems that the worse they are, the more they love her. Which means... they can begin a little to love themselves, and children who love themselves do not strike out at other people. They do not shoot their classmates or blow up their schools. I would like children to take from a book I've written something that helps them love and value themselves."³⁵

Until recently, books for young children attempted to shield their readers from issues of



social importance. Now, death and divorce, sibling rivalry, adoption, gender roles and sexuality are among topics in which literature offers constructive advice to child readers. Furthermore, books provide a place for youngsters to examine and confront these issues in a protected

vicarious situation. "Characters in literature provide us with a window to the soul through which we can examine the internal and external factors involved in becoming or failing to become the kind of person we admire or respect... By encouraging students to pay attention to how fictional characters respond to the truth, we help them to acquire greater respect for integrity, contempt for hypocrisy, and sensitivity to what accounts for moral growth or moral decline."³⁶

Bibliotherapy

Healing Place of the Soul

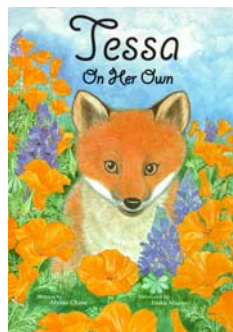
Inscription over the door of the Library at Thebes

Although the power of stories has been known since ancient times, the term bibliotherapy was coined for the first time early in the twentieth century.³⁷ Since the 1930s, librarians have been compiling “lists of written material that helped individuals modify their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors for therapeutic purposes.”³⁸

Bibliotherapy refers to the practice of guided reading and the use of literature to help people solve problems. It is also viewed as a way to “produce affective change and promote personality growth and development.”³⁹

Reflecting the evolution of children’s and young adult literature from the early 1900s through to the present, bibliotherapy as applied to children and adolescents has gone from didacticism to sentimentality to realism.⁴⁰ Also reflecting society’s perceived ills, contemporary children’s literature now addresses a breadth of psychosocial issues ranging from bullying and peer pressure, to questions of drug use, child abuse, divorce and sexuality.

The underlying assumption in bibliotherapy is that it allows the reader to identify with a character and learn vicariously how to work through a particular problem. The reader is able to feel less isolation and simultaneously gain knowledge through examples of how others have dealt with similar concerns.⁴¹ In clinical bibliotherapy, professionals use therapeutic techniques to help children with



serious emotional problems. In the school setting, classroom teachers use developmental bibliotherapy proactively to help students with more typical psychosocial development. In either case, the therapy usually consists of a facilitated discussion of the text with the child or group of students, and then follow-up activities such as drawing or journaling to help the child express and assimilate feelings and ideas about the text and the issue it seeks to address.

Research-based Character Education

Great learning and superior ability are of little value unless honor, truth and integrity are added to them.

Abigail Adams

Since 1988, MarshMedia has produced literature-based character education materials for Grades K-4. In 2005, MarshMedia responded to a growing need for demonstrable evidence that the Marsh program materials have positive effects in the classroom, and to that end, engaged The Teel Institute For the Development of Integrity And Ethical Behavior to design an original research initiative.

The research showed a significant increase in student understanding of new character concepts. Among the findings:

- ❖ Guided discussion is effective in helping students understand the messages of the story.
- ❖ The testing instrument works as a tool for (a) reinforcing ideas of the story and (b) assessing effectiveness of the story as a teaching approach.

- ❖ The messages in the story reach a very diverse group of students, including urban students and students with learning disabilities.

The Marsh program materials consist of a series of 30 educational “kits” designed to address a key concept of healthy personal development or character (e.g., individual worth, leadership, trustworthiness, sharing, the value of work, cooperation) and social issues in the classroom (e.g., teasing, anger management, following rules, peer pressure, bullying). Each kit consists of

- ❖ a children’s illustrated storybook that is either read by or to students in the classroom;
- ❖ a video or DVD, which includes a word-for-word voiceover of the story accompanied by original music and illustrations that come direct from the storybook;
- ❖ a teaching guide with extension activities for the classroom student;
- ❖ a supplemental guide for parents with activities to use with their student(s) at home.

In addition, evaluation guides were developed for each of the titles, intended for use as “processing guides.” Evaluation guides, as well as the teaching guides, are adaptable to bibliotherapy techniques. Designed for teachers and parents, evaluation guides help emphasize the important concepts of the story to young readers or listeners. The anticipatory discussion can help adults highlight the key ideas that children will be learning, and after reading the story and/or showing the video or DVD, the discussion questions help to reinforce the main concepts. The discussion questions also serve to refine the ideas contained in the story, to engage children in actively processing these main ideas, and to help

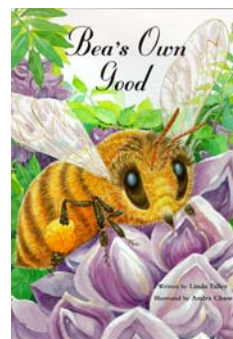
them integrate the central messages for themselves. The guide is scripted for ease of use; the script can be used exactly as written or substituted with the adult’s own words.

In short, the MarshMedia character education kits are well designed for integrating academic and character development for elementary grade students.

Go Forth

An old Chinese philosopher, when asked what had been his greatest joy in life, replied, “A child goes down the road singing after asking me the way.”⁴²

As character education continues to play an important role in education, it is key that parents and educators to be enlightened about its place and efficacy in schooling. Although there exist concerns about academic freedoms, and caution



around personal belief systems and privacy, it has been argued that all forms of education contain the teaching of values. School counselors, classroom teachers, librarians and other educators can advocate for, select, teach, and facilitate character education programs. Literature-based programs offer a valuable way to integrate and develop both academic and character growth.

Recommended Resources

National Organizations

Character Education Partnership
1025 Connecticut Avenue NW
Suite 1011
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 296-7743
Fax: (202) 296-7779
<http://www.character.org>

The Center For The 4th And 5th Rs
SUNY Cortland School of Education
P.O. Box 2000
Cortland, NY 13045
Phone: (607) 753-2455
Fax: (607) 753-5980
<http://www.cortland.edu>

The Center for Learning
P.O. Box 910
2105 Evergreen Road
Villa Maria, PA 16155
Phone: 800-767-9090
Fax: 888-767-8080
<http://www.centerforlearning.org>

National Center for Youth Issues
6101 Preservation Dr.
Chattanooga, TN 37416
Phone: 423.899.5714
Fax: 423.899.4547
<http://www.ncyi.org>

Printed Resources

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Editors: Drs. Marvin Berkowitz and Stephen
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About MarshMedia

When MarshMedia undertook the development
of character education materials the company
already had a successful history in publishing
health and human growth materials that dealt
with difficult subject areas such as sexuality and
drug and alcohol education. Our moderate
editorial position, reliance on recognized expert
sources, and judicious feedback from our
patrons in the field (primarily school teachers
and counselors), provided a solid platform for
this endeavor.

Knowing that classroom populations typically
include a wide range of abilities, we wanted to
provide teachers with a framework that could be
adapted to diverse learning environments as
well as differentiated for individual abilities.
The multimedia basis of the program enables
teachers to tailor the materials for individual
students or more general classroom needs. The
comprehensive cross-curriculum teaching

guides provide a wonderfully enriching educational experience.

When the results of the Teel Institute research project were available, we were pleased to learn that our materials are very well suited to children who are in urban school settings as well as students with developmental disabilities.

This MarshMedia White Paper is a natural outgrowth of our experience. It sets out key principles in support of character education. By examining particular issues in the area of disseminating character education, we seek to supply parents and educators and other advocates in the field with guidance and support.

For more information about MarshMedia and the character education programs, visit www.marshmedia.com

Endnotes

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Charles C. Haynes and Marvin W. Berkowitz

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